Jews & Black American Culture

Posted At : February 10, 2012 8:30 AM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer
Related Categories: Black-Jewish relations, Black History Month, diversity, race, identity, culture

> Jews in the United States today are creating a Jewish culture that draws heavily on African American and, in the case of reggae, Afro-Caribbean styles of expression.

So writes Eric Goldstein in the **Fall 2007** issue of **AJS Perspectives.** Continuing our **Black History Month series**, let us explore **Fashioning Jewishness in a Black and White World:**

> Although this trend is being pursued by many types of Jews, it owes much of its current vogue to the lively subculture known as the "Jewish hipster" movement and its unofficial organ, *Heeb* magazine. Since its debut in 2002, Heeb has often linked Jews with blacks as part of its overall campaign to demonstrate that Jewishness can be "cool," a point often made with *Heeb*'s special brand of over-the-top comedy. The magazine's very first cover, for example, featured black hands placing a round piece of shmurah matzoh on a turntable, a theme echoed in a long-running satirical advertisement in which an African American man proclaims a piece of Streit's matzoh to be "a big ass cracker!"...
>
> ...The trend so apparent in *Heeb* soon appeared in other quarters as well. In 2003, writer-director Jonathan Kesselman presented the first "Jewxploitation film," the *Hebrew Hammer*, which used similar comic hyperbole to explicitly link Jews and African Americans. Drawing on the popular blaxploitation genre of the 1970s, the film followed the adventures of a tough Jewish action hero who speaks with "a mix of Black Panther argot and Yiddish"
> and "struts through the 'chood' instilling Jewish pride in its youth." The music industry, as suggested above, has become perhaps the most active arena in which young Jews link themselves with black culture. The most famous example is Matisyahu (né Matthew Paul Miller), the Chabad/Lubavitch devotee who was named top reggae artist of 2006 by *Billboard* magazine...
>
> ...In all of these cases, it is apparent that the use of black images and style allow young Jews to link themselves to what they perceive as the assertiveness and independence of African Americans. Despite contemporary society's claim to be a "multicultural" one, the black-white divide is still a powerful enough construct to make African Americans the most powerful symbol of difference in American society. As a result, they are an attractive touchstone for Jews who have become frustrated with the constraints placed on them by their membership in the white mainstream...
>
> ...In the 1920s and 1930s, Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker and other Jewish performers were well known for their blackface routines, which lampooned blacks but also contained elements of tribute and identification... As memoirs of the interwar years record, Jewish youth frequently listened to

> "race records" and invited black musicians to perform at their dances. Some made excursions to Harlem and other black neighborhoods in the urban north to seek out nightclubs and dance halls and sometimes romantic liaisons...
>
> ...What, then, separates the contemporary Jewish appropriation of black culture from these earlier examples? First and foremost, prewar Jews who experimented with black culture did so under a very different set of social circumstances. Not yet fully vested as a part of the white mainstream, Jews before 1945 were often described, and described themselves, as members of a distinct "race." Although this did not necessarily mean that they were seen as nonwhite, it did mean that they occupied an uncertain place in America's racial constellation...
>
> ...In this context, Jews who bristled under the pressures of acculturation often found black culture to be a welcome escape valve...
>
> ...After 1965, however, two major shifts began to occur in American Jewish identity. First, a growing acceptance of difference in American culture lessened the pressure on Jews to downplay their distinctiveness. Second, the emergence of Black Power movements and civil rights legislation that identified minority status with peoples of color made many Jews uneasy with how they were now defined as part of the white power structure, a designation that cut against their own "outsider" consciousness. Ironically, having begun to achieve the privileged status they had long sought, they now felt troubled by the threatened loss of their group distinctiveness...
>
> ...The fact that Jewish integration has continued to reach unprecedented levels in recent years helps explain the intensifying appeal of African American culture, which gives contemporary Jews a powerful tool for asserting their difference. Unlike the flirtations of Jews with black culture in the 1920s and 1930s, today's Jewish interest in hip-hop, reggae, African American-Jewish celebrities and black cultural style is part of a broader assertion of Jewish particularity.

Read more...

Download directly...

To read more publications at intersections of Black and Jewish history, see this special **Bookshelf for Black History Month.**

(Remember, if you're a **registered** user [it's free], you can **create bookshelves** like this one to save sets of BJPA documents for later. Keep them private, or publish them to the web to share with colleagues. Sort manually, or automatically by date or title. View or print the lists, or export to MS Word for easy bibliographies.)